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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes arguments surrounding the closing of Hisel School in Jackson County, Kentucky, in an effort to analyze the debate on rural education in Appalachia and how it relates to school-community relationships. Events surrounding closure of the school are summarized, including a two-year period in which a school community volunteer group maintained the facility. Community support and activism through 1986 delayed consolidation of the school, which now serves 45 children in grades 1-8. While debate about the merits of the school included class conflict, culture conflict and narrow self-interest, four frames of reference emerge as those most frequently used to define the issue: Romantic-Traditional, Urban-Idealistic, Rational-Technocratic, and Democratic-Localist. Romantic-Traditional thinking was reflected in many media references to the one-room school houses of long ago. Such consciousness contrasted the one-room school with the new, modern, less personal building. The Urban-Idealistic approach accepted urban institutions as synonymous with progress, seeing the smaller schools as obstacles. Rational-Technocratic thinking assumed that a modern school would be more cost-effective and reasonable; and finally, Democratic-Localist consciousness was evidenced in statements about the opportunity the smaller school provided for a personalized, family-like education of rural students. The evidence indicates that the Rational-Technocratic argument, often reflected by administrators and government policy makers, was the most powerful and offered the prime justification for closing the school. The paper concludes by suggesting that educational reformers would do well to study how school-community relationships are influenced by frames of reference that take the form of types of consciousness. There is a nine-item list of references. (TES)

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Irreparable Harm: The Manipulation of Symbols in One School Consolidation Struggle

a paper presented at
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School/community relations are governed by views of education that are held by a variety of persons acting as students, parents, citizens, professionals, and even judges. On January 17, 1985 a judge in the Commonwealth of Kentucky 41st Judicial Circuit Court filed this Finding of Fact and Conclusion of Law.

> In light of the irreparable harm to the students of Hisel School the balancing of the interest of the parties herein dictates that Hisel School not be closed during the present school year. The Board will suffer less than the students of Hisel School by leaving that school in operation for the current school year, and the interest of the community, generally, will be better served. (Court Finding, p.5)

This was but one of many attempts to define irreparable harm coming from the operation of formal education in Appalachia in the past two decades. In this paper the discussion about the operation of Hisel School will be used as evidence for analysis of the debate on rural education in Appalachia and how it relates to school/community relationships.

Hisel School was opened in 1959 as a consolidated school to replace five one-room schools; it has four large rooms and is situated in the Hisel community. Students in the nearby area take a short bus ride to attend the school. It has two teachers, two teacher-aids, a cook, and a custodian. The enrollment now is 45 students in grades 1-8. This enrollment has declined from 77 students in 1973. That was the first year the State labeled the school an 'interim center' and recommended its consolidation with a larger school, a 45 minute bus ride away.

In 1982, when the Board of Education was about to accept the county Superintendent's recommendation to close the school, parents and community members organized a petition and public meetings to mobilize opinion to keep the school open. When the parents and community members promised to try to raise enrollments, and after they described a program of community work on the school and parent cooperation with the teachers, the Superintendent did not go ahead with the recommendation to close the school. It was kept open on a year-to-year basis but still had the status of 'interim school'. From 1982 to 1984 the School-Community Steering Committee organized work days, painted the school with donated labor and paint, built a playground, and organized a library with donated books.

In 1984, after the start of the school year, the Superintendent recommended closing the school to be able to use the Hisel teachers elsewhere, and the Board voted 3-2 to accept this recommendation. The Hisel parents and community members, after all protests failed, hired a lawyer to take out a temporary restraining order stopping the closing. The resulting legal hearing lead to an injunction preventing the school closing in mid-year. Also, the 1984 School Board election resulted in a Board majority of 3-2 in favor of keeping the school open. The 1986 Board election changed the composition of the Board, but the school was again kept open this year.

Public debate about the merits of this school includes of course class conflict, culture conflict, narrow self-interest exercised in the name of greater good and yes, even forms of trickery and dishonesty. But an interpretation of the manipulation of symbols in such a conflict alerts us to something important in school community relations. It is what symbolic interactionists call "stock knowledge at hand", the social conceptions and frames of reference with which humans interpret events. These are an implicit set of assumptions silently used as people interact. Scrutiny of the conflict about Hisel gives examples of what I will refer to as different types of consciousness using four categories: Romantic-Traditional, Urban-Idealistic, Rational-Technocratic, and Democratic-Localist.

Evidence of a Romantic-Traditional consciousness is found in statements referring to modern Hisel School in terms of its bucolic rural setting, and its imagined similarity to the one-room, frame school houses of long ago. This four-room school with central heating, running water, and telephone is depicted as a structure of a completely different type from the consolidated school. One television commentator in 1984 began his report by talking about "the small cement block school atop a gentle hill that harkens back to education of an earlier time". But the consolidated school is also of cement block construction on top of a gentle hill--it is simply much larger.

More commonly these statements evoked a view of Hisel as the embodiment of an unassailable tradition. "When I went to school we had one teacher for all the pupils and we learned plenty." (letter to author) "The consolidated school will never be able to match the learning that went on in my old school." (letter to author) The focus on tradition was often summed up in the sentiment "old ways are best". The tradition argument was once used to defend the school remaining open when a person in an open meeting said, [closing the school is]"sort of like takking your grand-daddy out and putting him in a field (to die) and he's the last grand-daddy". (JCS Aug. 5, 1982)

The romantic view is evidenced in comments depicting the small rural school as a place where children in the past escaped from influences for social deviance, plus a belief that this will happen today as well. [If they go to the large school] "I know they're going to get into dope". "They've just got more dope, more sorriness, going on there in [those] big schools". (JCS Aug. 5, 1982)

The Romantic-Traditional consciousness was most commonly evidenced in older citizens' comments and the tone of press reports from outside the county. A teacher, after saying, "We feel very strongly that our children can compete in basic quality of education" went on to dismiss a reporter's comment about characterization of the school as "romantic". "Its only romantic if you're on the outside looking in. If you're on the inside looking out, it is not romantic. It is darn hard work." (LHL Oct. 24, 1984)

A Romantic-Traditional consciousness was to some extent latent in the struggle for opinion. The Superintendent in 1984 once said "Tradition is the main reason people are objecting to the closing". (CJ Oct. 20, 1984) Tradition was never seriously advanced as an argument for keeping the school open, but it often did appear as a journalistic angle for the state news media and it did seem to be behind some of the sympathy the school got from older Jackson county citizens.

Consciousness of tradition was useful, however, as a straw man for attack by persons supporting the closing of the school. The Ashland Daily Independent titled an editorial "Education should win over nostalgia" . The editorial concluded, "It is not a time for becoming nostalgic over the closing of one of the few remaining two-room schools. It is a time for offering Hisle (sic) students a better education at a lower cost by moving them to another school." (LHL Nov. 12, 1984) These qualities of "better" and "lower cost" were used most frequently in the three other types of consciousness.

Another group of persons making observations about the conflict over Hisel seemed to exhibit what I will call an Urban-Idealistic Consciousness. Such a construction of reality accepts urban forms of human association and urban institutions as synonymous with progress. A belief in urban ways as better than rural ways, or the equating of urbanization with progress, has a long history in Appalachia. For formal education in Jackson county there is an extensive tradition of seeing urban organization forms and artifacts in a positive light. In 1901 the county Superintendent of Education justified a management system that reduced representation of county citizens as an improvement because they now would

"exercise the same powers as the boards of education in our cities". (Boyd, p.110) Another superintendent in 1917 proudly reported that his administration had improved things that year by furnishing "every school house in the county with patent desks". (Boyd, p.112) Equating urban schools solely with progress is certainly an extreme form of idealism, but today the practice continues.

In one form of an Urban-Idealistic consciousness urban sports equipment have replaced patent desks. A Board member lamented the absence of an indoor basketaball court in the following terms. "They are sitting over there and playing ball in a gravel or concrete pit....there's no sense in us sitting here as board members....letting children do it if we can find something better". There are "more opportunities" at the larger school. To clinch the argument he said if the small school was closed down who knows, "We could get the finest ball player in the county". (JCS Oct. 11, 1984)

Perhaps a basketball team's standing is an easy way to measure progress between counties; within this view of needed equipment the small school is an obstacle to county progress. Parents also find the absence of an indoor gym a probblem at times. One parent who lives near the Hisel school, who supported the school with labor but voluntarily sent his children to the consolidated school, said that his sons want to play basketball, little league and gymnastics which are only available there. (JCS Aug. 5, 1982)

Another form of the Urban consciousness sees the small rural school as an obstacle to progress in terms of the setting for education. Such a setting it is said leads to educational deprivation. A superintendent commenting on closing Hisel said, "most of the rest of the world is not like Hisel...I think personally, its good for the kids to get a view of what the rest of the world is like". (JCS Oct. 20, 1984) A college student-teacher expressed her frustration one day this way, "But the students there don't even know what an escalator is!". (interview, Spring 1983) And, one administrator in the central office passed this judgement on deprivation due to the setting, "When the students leave Hisel to attend high school, its like New York City to them". (JCS Aug. 5, 1982)

An escalator as simply technology useful to physically move people up or down, basketball as only one of the many forms of organized recreation, and rural life as vastly integrated into the urban scene in this age of migration and urban-dominated television, are all points that seem to have escaped the consciousness of these people. The small, rural school as an obstacle to individual and school system progress in these terms was a consciousness most often used by people who had an urabn orientation in their work and aspirations.

When the school Board in 1982 brought up declining enrollment as a reason to close the school Hisel residents claimed that the enrollment had declined because the school was "financially neglected over the years", thus some parents chose to send children elsewhere where better facilities (ie a gym) were provided. (JCS Aug. 5, 1982) Others said that enrollment declined due to the nature of teaching; at times a small rural school is used as a "punishment school". (interview, 1982) Teachers were sent to this setting as a penalty in the past. These same people argued that a small school, however, could be better than a larger one as it could allow holistic education. In this view Hisel was "better" as a setting.

Katz has referred to advocates of educational means and ends associated with rural education in the last century as "democratic localists". (Katz, passim) I use this term to characterize the next form of consciousness. A Democratic-Localist consciousness is evidenced in statements about the opportunity a small local setting provides for school flexibility and the education of students as persons rather than grades.

Family is often a metaphor for this. As a Hisel teacher said, "I know these children better than my own, I've spent more time with them". "At the end of the school year I write down the page number they're on, and the next fall we start exactly where we left off. That's a big advantage". "There are shared life experiences when you work with people this closely--its like what you have with a family." (LHL Oct. 24, 1984) A pupil of another ungraded elementary school put the sentiment this way in response to a National Public Radio reporter's question about what grade he was in, "I'm in 4th grade Math and 6th grade Reading", "it's like a normal family, people are different in different things".

A Democratic-Localist consciousness also is expressed in the form of seeing Hisel school as an educational innovation for students in need of different treatment. One person made a claim for innovation saying that Hisel school met a need for children from lower income families. Thus, for the children who go to Hisel school, smaller is better. "The kinds that come here are from backgrounds where they are from the bottom 10 percentile." "They're learning to stay in school because it's a pleasant place to be and [their parents act like] its an important place to be". (CJ Oct. 20, 1984)

The same person, a college professor in the Department of Education in a nearby institution, responded to the editorial claiming people opposed the closing out of nostalgia. He remarked that Hisel school deserved strong support because it "offers an excellent program for the needs of its students". The distant larger facility

"offers no improvement in the most essential aspects of school, but it does render parent involvement more difficult". (LHL Nov. 20, 1984) This argument claims that what children need most of all is to know that adults think that schools are a significant and important part of growing up. Hisel school had this direct parent involvement in the work days and the long struggle to keep it open.

The Chairman of the Appalachian Studies Conference in 1984 wrote a letter to the editor of a state paper claiming that for low-income rural children the loss of small schools has been "disastrous". He said "many of our best educational theoriests" now question the efficacy of school consolidation, they suggest that what children need most of all is a happy environment for learning. He asked rhetorically, what better place for remote, rural children to seek an introduction to the world of learning than a school in their own community? An then he concluded, "The Hisel parents, it seems, already know what our educational research is leading us to". (CJ Nov. 12, 1984)

Another aspect of localist consciousness stressed what would be lost for the students with the closing of the school. An exceptionally articulate parent who moved to Hisel from Ohio and who had been an educator in the past expressed the view this way. Small classes would be replaced by larger ones. A short bus ride would be replaced by a longer one. "Recreation where boys and girls of all ages and grades enter into various games and activities of their choice" would be replaced by more narrow age and sexual groupongs plus after-school team sports that are only an option for children living near the school or those who can be privately driven home. A lunchroom at Hisel where the children eat family-style, seven or eight to a table, individually served by the cook, would be replaced by cafeteria-style eating with children in food lines eating at long tables running the length of the room. (JCS Oct. 31, 1984)

Most frequently expressing this Democratic-Localist consciousness were parents of Hisel school children, some Hisel teachers plus other teachers in the county, some community members, and some academics viewing the struggle from outside. Their localism perhaps blinded them to the possibility of tyranny in the setting of a small school where a few unsupervised teachers might reign supreme. Their focus on Democratic control (ie community involvement alongside the professional teacher) perhaps caused them to see only dimly the possibility of narrow interests ruling school affairs rather than liberal views of curriculum and pedegogy. But most certainly their stress on flexibility, the advantages of smallness, and even the family nature of the dining arrangements, did

nothing to alert them to the strongly suggested irrationality of delivering educational services in the manner of Hisel school. From the Rational-Technocratic perspective small is technically inefficient and thus irrational.

Among many others the sociologist Jergan Habermas has written of our Industrial Society's emphasis upon "instrumental reason". From this logical stance science is used to realize specific goals of efficiency, then the power of the state uses such a criterion to reconcile competing goals of groups, and finally basic cultural values themselves are also assessed and evaluated in terms of efficiency and rationality. (Turner, p.195) Another aspect of this logic has been described by Ivan Illich as the discounting of use-value, replacing it with market value calculations; the result is action that ignores volunteer services while stressing costs of purchased services. (Illich, p.29) There is plenty of evidence of instrumental reason within the Rational-Technocratic arguments influencing the debate about Hisel School.

Lower dollar costs are constantly being used to justify the closing of the school. In 1982 a superintendent pointed out that bussing the children further and transferring the teachers to more crowded schools would save on heating, water, and electricity. (JCS Aug.5, 1982) Since busses were already plying the route with high school students, plus some elementary pupils from more urban-oriented families, there would be no added transportation costs. Again in 1984 a different superintendent put the case boldly. "Educationally you can argue it both ways (but) the trend is toward (consolidation). That doesn't mean its right (but) financially its more efficient." (CJ Oct.20, 1984)

Rationality was frequently used as a justification for the closing. In 1982 the Superintendent said her feelings could best be described as "the mind wrassling with the heart" as she appreciated the atmosphere of the school but also considered the cost. (JCS Aug.5, 1982) Another Superintendent in 1984 said "I have the greatest sympathy for [the parents'] situation. But its one of those things that I have to do. I don't see any reasonable way around it." (CJ Oct. 20, 1984) In a different interview he was quoted as saying "It sounds like the big bad wolf is devouring the little school....But this is real life--the realities of financing education." (LHL Oct. 24, 1984)

Even the very technology supporting the distribution of food was invoked as an argument for closing the school. Members of the committee to improve the school were told of a negative evaluation made by a federal food commodity inspector in September 1984. Food storage in other than a walk-in-cooler and the absence of a vent over

the stove were among the reasons cited for the school not being in compliance with federal regulations for participation in the school lunch program. (Steering Committee notes, Sept. 17, 1984) In the state press the superintendent pointed to a further requirement of technology related to food handling. "The cafeteria is one of the problems with the school. Federal regulations require that, for health purposes, meals be prepared in a separate room from where children eat...." (LHL Oct.24, 1984)

Finally, support for a Rational-Technical consciousness is directly linked with the educational policy of the state Department of Education. The professional educators who are civil servants monitoring and advising the county school system first listed Hisel Elementary as an "interim center", recommending consolidation, in their School Facility Survey of June 1973. The same recommendation was made in the 1977 Facility Survey and the 1982 Accreditation Survey Report. For the past fourteen years this school has never fit into their view of 'facility planning' for Jackson County.

In September of 1984 the State Board of Education passed a regulation to enforce the new law reducing maximum class size to 25 for grades 1-3 and 27 for grades 4-12. The Hisel parents knowing that their school had a smaller class size than the maximum (approx. 24 per teacher) believed that this new regulation would work to support keeping the school open. But that was not the case. From a Rational-Technocratic perspective this made closing Hisel even more rational. In the entire county school system eleven classes were now deemed overcrowded, so closing Hisel's classes that did not exceed the maximum would allow the addition of the two teachers elsewhere, thus reducing class size in the Southern part of the county. (JCS Oct. 11, 1984) The school Board voted to accept the superintendent's recommendation to do this by a vote of 3-2.

After the outcry from Hisel, and the state-wide attention to the issue, the county superintendent asked the Superintendent of Public Instruction to comment on this method of ensuring small class size through the closing of small classes rather than hiring more teachers. She responded this way in a letter published in the county newspaper.

> Our review of this situation has been an effort to be of assistance to you and your Board as well as the citizens of the Hisel community. While I am sympathetic to the concerns of the citizens in the Hisel community, I believe you have been fair and reasonable in dealing with this difficult situation. I have no additional alternatives to offer at this time. (JCS Oct.31, 1984)

Proponents of this Rational-Technocratic consciousness were most frequently administrators of schools as systems, as well as managers of state and federal programs. At times it seemed persons holding this construction of reality might be blinded to the educational benefits others found in the Hisel School operation. But this was not the case at all times. In the 1984 court hearing when the parents asked the judge for a Temporary Injunction enjoining the Board from closing the school, the Board defended its plans by arguing that Hisel was too good a school! As the Board lawyer said in an interview, "The system can't afford the priviledge of keeping the community school open. We know Hisel is a good school." (CJ Nov. 24, 1984) The legal memorandum filed by the defendents--that is the Board of Education--which sums up evidence taken during the hearing that they believe to be in their favor put it this way.

> [The Superintendent] acknowledged that the students at Hisel were getting a good education, that the teachers were excellent teachers, and that the school has a low pupil-teacher ratio. In fact, the pupil-teacher ratio at Hisel School was lower than the system could afford. He acknowledged that there would be some detrimental effect on some of the students by the closing of Hisel, but that the beneficial effect of the closing on the school system as a whole was greater than the detrimental effect on the few students. (Defendent's, Board of Education, Memorandum, p.16)

The court found in favor of the parents preventing the school from being closed for the rest of that academic year. The court did not challenge the logic behind the Board's view of education. The plaintifs won because they convinced the judge that other methods of getting the needed money or teachers could be found that were less harmful to Hisel pupils than the one requiring they change schools in the middle of the year.

In conclusion, the Hisel example makes it clear that people working to reform education in Appalachia must take cognizance of something in addition to social class differences and cultural differences. School/community relationships are also profoundly influenced by different frames of reference that take the form of types of consciousness. Reformers must deal with these, and they must be aware that Rational-Technocratic consciousness is the most powerful; it is both the most taken-for-granted and the one advanced with the authority of the state and the professon fully behind it. What some see as cruel irony this type of consciousness makes "fair" and "reasonable".The examples of this are open for all to see.

When the legislature ordered smaller class sizes, the school in the county with the smaller sizes is closed to send the teachers elsewhere.

When the State Superintendent of Instruction is starting to promote parental involvement, the place with parents involved in the maintenance of the building and the organization of a library rather than basketball and band boosting is closed.

And, at a time when low-income mountain people are being disparaged for having little interest or stake in their children's education, a place where people sacrificed personal time, money and effort couldn't get the message out because the school that was the object of their effort was seen as a symbol of romantic tradition, an obstacle to urban ways, and an inefficient priviledge they did not merit.

This example of the clash of symbols makes it clear that school reform in Appalachia requires more than organizational skills for political mobilization. It needs a refined awareness of levels of meaning for the mobilization of rhetoric about damages to formal education coming from the operation of the actual process of formal education.

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